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Section of the article:

Being working class in the academy

While widening access is high on universities' agendas at undergraduate level, class barriers still prevail in the academy. Here, ... working-class scholars describe their experiences of 'otherness'...

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Carole Binns is a lecturer in criminal justice studies at the University of Bradford:

Cultural capital bestows on the middle class an iron-clad certainty that they can thrive in any social milieu'

I love my job as a university lecturer. I gain satisfaction from teaching, research and even departmental paperwork.

But I don't enjoy networking events. In fact, I dread what I perceive to be contrived social situations.

It might be a bit reductive to attribute all of this to my working-class background in the East End of London in the early 1960s, but I am currently leading a qualitative UK study of academics from similar backgrounds and I have noticed that nearly all of the participants, despite being experienced researchers and scholars, feel the same. During my interviews with them, many spoke at length of their unease and lack of enthusiasm around "forcing" new networks. Many said that they preferred to develop working associations more organically, at their own pace - or with people they already know.

It's not that I don't apply to present at conferences and seminars, or aspire to meet people who are engaged in projects similar to mine. I see doing so as part of my contracted role and I go along with it. And I'm fine being asked questions about my presentation. I'm fine in the lunch queue, chattering to the person next to me about the dining options. But I am like a fish out of water when it comes to the networking.

One of my participants said they "couldn't think of anything worse" than approaching fellow scholars at a conference to - as another interviewee put it - "talk about research and bids and tout for business". Another said that "engineered networking" left them "worn out". These are, on the whole, far more experienced academics, researchers and publishers than myself, some of them at professorial level, with substantial lists of publications and major research grants.

Of course, people can struggle to schmooze for all kinds of reasons aside from their class background. But Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's concept of cultural capital is surely

relevant: the unseen and unofficial education that bestows on the middle class an iron-clad certainty that they can thrive in any social milieu.

Perhaps universities could attempt to compensate for their working-class students' deficit in this area, but I suspect they will be fighting a losing battle. Over the years I've become a little better at it, but I don't think that networking will ever be my thing.